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WASHINGTON POST
9 February 1987

Iraq Stops Iran; War of Attrition Seen Likely

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Washington Post Foreign Service

CAIRO, Feb. 8—Iraqi Army counterattacks last week routed Iranian forces from some positions just east of Basra but failed to dislodge the bulk of Iran's assault force occupying Iraqi territory, according to military analysts.

An Iranian military communique reported that 700 Iraqis were killed or wounded during the weekend when Iraqi forces mounted a two-pronged counterattack against Iranian forces besieging the southern port city of Basra. The hand-to-hand fighting reportedly was supported on the Iraqi side by tanks and heavy artillery.

Western military analysts credit the Iraqi counterattacks, which began a week ago, with a rout of Iranian attackers from the western banks of Fish Lake, a canal-like reservoir built as a defensive barrier six miles east of Basra. The Iraqis also reportedly reversed the momentum of Iranian forces that slogged their way up the western banks of the Shatt al Arab waterway during the first two weeks of the offensive.

But as of today, one month after the offensive began, neither side has been able to consolidate its battlefield gains. With another major Iranian push expected this month, military intelligence analysts in the region suggest that the offensive may be settling into a war of attrition that poses grave dangers for Iraq.

The analysts say they expect the Iranians to move this month near Basra, aiming either to topple the city's still formidable main defense line or, more likely, to thrust south of the city to cut off Iraq's 7th Army Corps, which stands between Iran's forces on the Faw Peninsula and the Kuwaiti border. A third but less likely possibility, according to these sources, is a major assault toward Baghdad by the 80,000-man regular Army force massed in the Sumar Basin northeast of the capital. This invasion force is backed by

the largest portion of Iran's heavy artillery and armored tank battalions, according to officials with access to U.S. satellite reconnaissance data.

One military official estimated that Iran has 1,000 tanks in this central sector, which is about 85 miles from Baghdad. But few specialists predict an all-out assault on the dusty plains of the Sumar, where larger and better equipped Iraqi tank forces and Iraqi air superiority stand as a formidable deterrent.

Iraq already has suffered 10,000 to 20,000 casualties, with 6,000 or more dead, western analysts estimate. Its strategic weakness always has been its inability to absorb large numbers of casualties. A country of 15 million, Iraq faces an ideologically charged enemy with a population of 40 million.

Although Iran's casualties may run three times as high as Iraq's, its ability to send throngs of zealous new volunteers to the front forms an unshakable strategic power in the conflict. In the midst of the fighting this month, Iran's spiritual leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini appealed for 100,000 volunteers to mount the second wave of what Iran calls its "final offensive." Many of those new volunteers have arrived in the staging areas near the fighting, according to sources.

In contrast, the Iraqi military command has been forced to commit the bulk of its only reserve force, the elite Republican Guards, to defensive units around Basra and in the central sector.

The outstanding question among western observers is how long Iraq's political leadership can survive if this winter's military clash drags out, leaving Baghdad with two equally threatening choices: losing thousands more soldiers or conceding more territory to Iran.

Western observers have noted that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein has put distance between himself and the Iraqi military's performance at Basra, making only a

brief visit to the 3rd Army Corps headquarters on Jan. 11. This is in sharp contrast to Hussein's almost constant presence in the battle arena a year ago when Iranian troops routed an Iraqi Popular Army garrison holding the southern port of Faw.

A December victory in which Iraq detected and repelled an Iranian attempt to bridge four islands across the Shatt had seemed to restore momentum to Iraq after its humbling loss of Faw in February 1986 and its July 1986 retreat from the Iranian town of Mehran.

But many western sources in Baghdad and elsewhere in the region have now concluded that the Jan. 9 Iranian assault across Fish Lake and a flanking move up the Shatt waterway from Khorramshahr caught the Iraqis by surprise and a number of defensive brigades out of position.

One western official in Baghdad said that an early January visit by Jordan's King Hussein to Baghdad was made to warn Iraq's president not to fall complacent after the December victory.

Within hours of Hussein's departure, the Iranians struck near Basra in what has become one of the longest sustained military campaigns of the six-year-old war.

As the battlefield situation deteriorated for Iraq, the government did nothing to deny persistent reports in Baghdad that the chief of staff of the armed forces, Gen. Abdul Jawad Zannoun, and the 3rd Army Corps commander, Talia Khalil Douri, were removed from their jobs.

For Iran, the principal danger of this winter's offensive is that it appears to put everything on the line to achieve a striking military victory. Yet thus far, as some skeptical military analysts point out, it has failed to penetrate and hold more than a few square miles of Iraqi ter-

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ritory at an incredibly high cost in men and materiel.

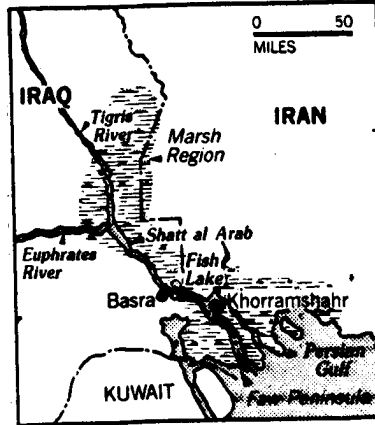
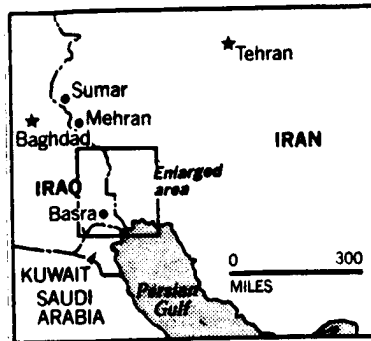
By one analyst's calculation, Iran has sacrificed "one soldier for every square meter of territory they have taken."

One western estimate held that 1 million rounds of artillery shells had been fired by both sides in the first 16 days of the offensive. Iraq, which spends \$1 billion a month on its war effort during peak periods of fighting, has a much greater reserve of munitions and military equipment.

Some western military specialists wonder whether Iran's tattered economy can continue to sustain

the cost of resupplying its battlefield commanders with artillery shells, ammunition or even the grenades hurled by the Khomeini guards who have charged Iraqi positions in human waves.

But Iran, whose financial reserves have been dangerously low for the last two years, has managed to repair much of the structural damage to its oil production facilities, enabling it to reach a production level of 2.2 million barrels per day. At that level, Iran may well be able to replenish the war stocks drawn down in the initial rounds of fighting this year.



BY HARRY FORD — THE WASHINGTON POST